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PASS THE WORD
A PROJECT OF THE KENTUCKY ORAL HISTORY COMMISSION

CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: AFRICAN AMERICAN CAVE EXPLORERS AND GUIDES



Kentucky Historical Society collections

MAMMOTH CAVE —Mammoth Cave hasn't always been a national park, but it has been a tourist destination in Kentucky for more than 150 years.

The tours and routes through the cave that are familiar to visitors today were discovered and recorded by Kentucky slaves and their descendants.

Beginning in 1838, Stephen Bishop, pictured here, explored the cave, crossing the Bottomless Pit and discovering the Fat Man's Misery passage.

Other guides helped map the cave system, discovered new cave shafts and guided tourists. Mammoth Caves' black guides continued to serve cave visitors after emancipation and passed their knowledge on to their children. As did freed men and women who remained on or near the farms of their former owners, African American guides felt connected to the cave, stayed in the area and served the cave and its visitors as they could.

Because jobs were not plentiful for African Americans, and those available were often menial, many of the guides worked as porters or cooks as well as surveyors and guides. Some of the former guides and their families are buried in the cemetery just outside the cave's main entrance.

The Kentucky Oral History Commission (KOHC), administered by the Kentucky Historical Society, is dedicated to supporting documentation of Kentucky's rich history along with the issues confronting its people. Pass the Word (passtheword.khs.gov) is an online database from the KOHC that facilitates discovery of more than 30,000 oral history interviews from Kentuckians in all 120 counties, located in more than 100 repositories across Kentucky.

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The Kentucky Historical Society is an agency of the
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